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# Assessing the Future of the New England Mill Town:

## What Are the Key Factors that Lead to Successful Revitalization?

by John Mullin and Zenia Kotval

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### *The New England Mill Community*

Over the past twenty years, we have been involved in economic revitalization projects in more than 50 mill towns across the state of Massachusetts. We begin these projects with a quiet visit to each community.

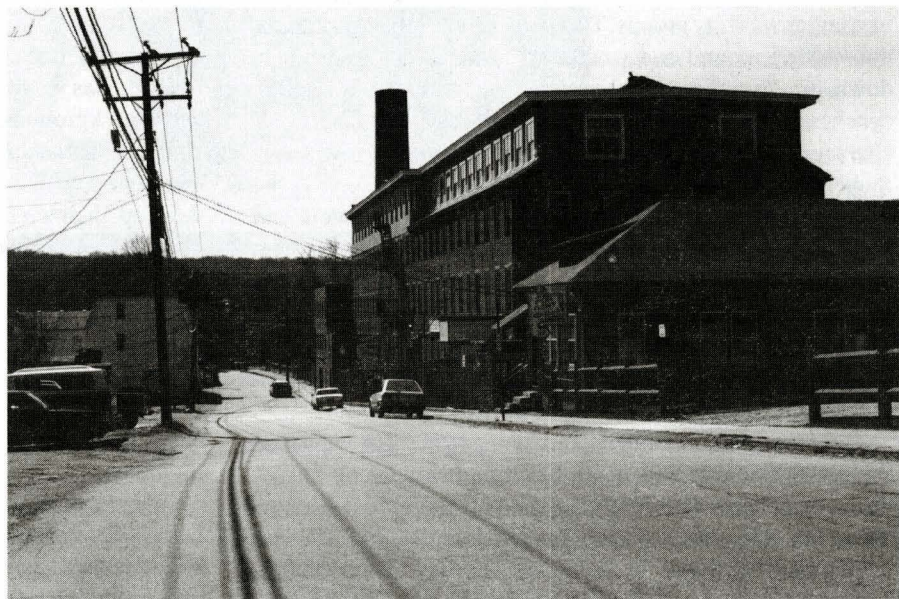
Moving off a state or interstate road, we meander down through a highly dense village of multiunit tenements. Built close to the road, they are always a decided mix of well-kept and decaying structures. They are rarely one or the other entirely. It is as if the residents and owners are undecided about reinvestment or commitment to the community.

Looking upward from the road, we see the great mansions, estates and large homes of former owners and overseers of the mill. Well past their prime, these buildings typically are now divided into cheap apartments. The cars outside are always old and are frequently unregistered. There is always a river nearby: the Merrimac, Nashua, Assabet, Housatonic, Taunton, Blackstone and Chicopee, their very names suggest work, utility and efficiency.

It is in the river that rationality and nature clash. With dams, sluice ways, channels and ponds, the mill owners, for generations, attempted to control the depth, speed, drop and direction of the mill stream. In this they frequently failed. Next to the river stands the mill. Typically consisting of several structures, it stands over the community. The buildings usually

stand 50 to 60 feet tall, dominating nearby housing which is under 25 feet in height.

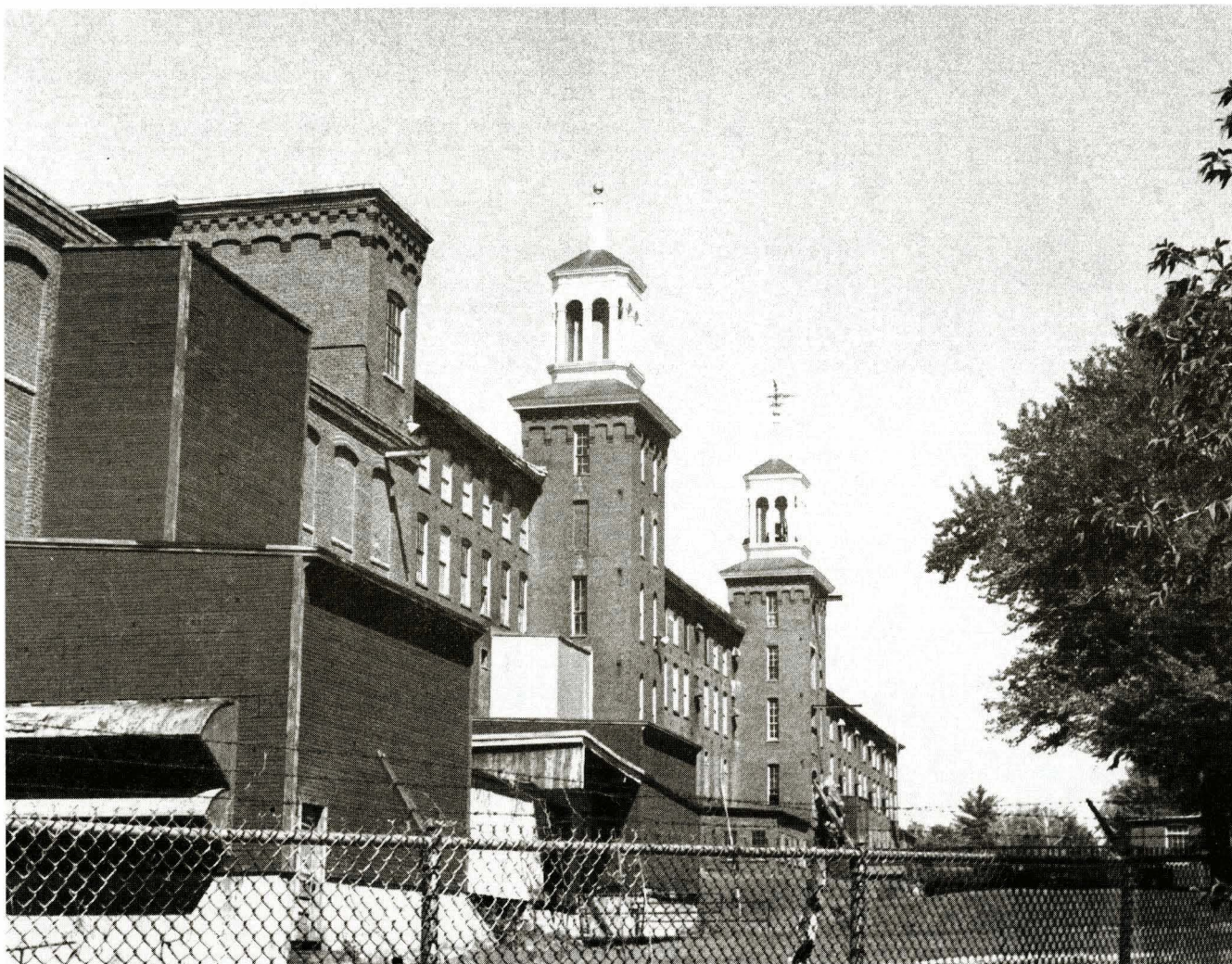
The mill's structures are commonly red brick, granite or



*Mill towns have unique personalities. The mill complex or complexes stand by the river and are comprised of many substantial structures. Together, they usually dominate the community. Neighborhoods near the mill buildings often feature houses that are now past their prime and are divided up into many small apartments. All photographs in this article courtesy of the Small Towns Institute.*

stone, which gives them a look of heavy permanence. Nearby houses seem flimsy by comparison. (One can't help but think of the Three Little Pigs!) The mill buildings also inspire a sense of patrimonial dominance. They represent power, strength, production, profit and a source of wealth. Strictly utilitarian, the structures often have a simple purity to them that can evoke positive aesthetic feelings. They can also be brutishly ugly.





*In a traditional mill town, the mill entrance has a central position in the community. Most other community activities were found just a little ways from the entrance. Schools, churches, libraries, housing, retail and many other functions seemed to cluster around the mill. The mills gave social and economic meaning to the town and this is seen in their placement.*

The main entrance of the mill occupies a central position. All necessary community functions operate in its shadow. The post office, library, banks, town shopping center and the Protestant Church are a stone's throw distant, and owe their existence to the mill. It is also here that one finds the nexus of road, water and railroad. The trestle and bridge frequently are such strong symbols in the mill community that they almost compete with the feelings of awe expressed toward the mill.

The town's main road connects the mill to critical production points in several directions. This street has none of the gentle curves or subtle views commonly found on colonial post roads. One does not see cows and horses on rocky slopes or corn and wheat in nearby green fields. Instead, the road is lined on either side by the mill, houses and retail shops. Its width is well-beyond the typical two road roads of most of our 18th century communities, and one may feel underfoot the paved-over tracks of the trolley lines that hail from the beginning of the 20th century.

And the rail lines? These were the essential connectors to faraway points: Boston, Worcester, Providence, Springfield and Hartford. The mill was clearly connected with the nation. All of the above characteristics are commonplace, and yet, each community in which they are found is unique.

### ***The New England Mill Town***

This is the story of the once and future New England mill town. These communities, despite the fact that many look tired and decayed, continue to play a vital role in local, state and national economies. They do this by continuing to manufacture plastic bowls, fine papers, automobile dash boards, microchip boards, wire, shirts, shoes and the like. They may not be the 19th century behemoths of United Shoe, American Woolen or the Ames Company, but they continue production, serving as a necessary cog in our economic system.

The 20th century mill differs in significant ways from its



19th century counterpart. There is minimal connectedness between the owner of the mill and the workers, virtually no relationship between the residents of former mill housing and the mill itself, and workers typically commute from afar. There most likely are many companies operating in one mill building. Attracted by low rents and flexible space, these buildings are ideal spots for starter companies. A variety of firms may coexist within the same building, including service industries, laboratories, research and development companies and manufacturing firms.

We are never surprised by the mixture of uses that one finds. We know of old mills where parts of the Patriot missile are built, the paper for dollar bills is rolled, egg cartons are made, Reeboks are assembled, and pots and pans are pressed. We have also seen mills that house colleges, first class restaurants, senior citizens, insurance companies and department stores. These structures, given the appropriate circumstances, are still vital.

Not all mills or all mill communities will survive or prosper. We have seen mill communities along the Housatonic, the Nashua and Quabog Rivers that clearly have no chance of recovery. They are too isolated, lack the required infrastructure or their buildings are beyond recovery. And, not all mill communities will grow and prosper at the same time.

We have witnessed one instance in which a mill community has declined, recovered, boomed, declined and is about to recover again. On the other hand, other communities, dormant for twenty years, are only now recovering. Recovery, we have found, occurs only when a series of integrated factors are present.

### ***What Are the Key Factors for Successful Revitalization?***

#### **The Building Must Be Usable**

In too many communities, the mills lie vacant, towering over the surrounding village to announce that this community is no longer viable. The psychological aspects of this are overwhelming. Anyone who has entered the once-thriving city of North Adams, Massachusetts, can see this quite clearly. The traveler passes through a gauntlet of structures that project shadow, darkness and gloom. But, if these structures have been protected, then indeed there is the potential for recovery.

We have noted that, given the nature of New England winters, it is imperative that mill buildings be heated to protect them from frost damage. As a case in point, the Mansfield Mill in Storrs, Connecticut, was unheated for only one season, and, as a result, was damaged so badly as to be nearly unsalvageable. On the other hand, the owners of Assabet Mill in Maynard, Massachusetts, once Digital Equipment Corporation's flagship facility, continue to heat the mill (which has more than one million square feet) despite the fact that no tenants are expected to lease space for the foreseeable future. We believe that the Mansfield Mill is lucky. It has been our

experience that the costs of recovery increase exponentially after one season of no heat, and that the chances of recovery decline precipitously.

#### **The Town's Regulations Must Meet the Needs of the Mill**

All of the mills predate zoning regulations. Equally as important, because they evolved without such constraints, mixed-use buildings were placed immediately outside the mill gate. Throughout the 20th century, however, our towns and cities have implemented zoning regulations that have rendered many of these structures "non conforming." In other words, the mill is not in compliance with the town or city's land use regulations. With noncompliance, the value of the property declines and bank officials are reluctant to invest in revitalization efforts.

It is also important to realize that most of these communities have adopted strict regulations that clearly separate land uses and have minimal flexibility. Called "Euclidean Zoning," from the city of Euclid, Ohio, where it was first implemented, this type of regulation renders the mill owner unable to attract the necessary variety tenants to the facility and to be reactive to local conditions. In Ayer, Massachusetts, for example, zoning requirements preclude the placement of office complexes in the town's light industrial park. And yet, throughout the surrounding region, such mixed-use areas are commonplace and office users, such as software firms, are expanding dramatically.

We strongly recommend that town and city governments become flexible in their zoning. This means that officials must pass ordinances that allow for an expanded set of uses under special permit or exception provisions and which allow for site planning provisions to be waived under the appropriate circumstances.

We take this stance for three reasons. First, these mills are usually too large to absorb any one company. We cannot, for instance, point to a single company that has moved into Massachusetts in the past decade with more than 200 employees. In addition, the owners must be able to attract those companies in the region that are growing. In many cases, these companies will not be allowed to move into the facility because such use is prohibited. For example, the Commonwealth of Massachusetts will likely add more than one hundred thousand new jobs in biotechnology over the next decade. In spite of this projection, less than 15 cities and towns in the state have biotechnology regulations in place. Communities that do have such ordinances have already attracted biotech companies, and, in Cambridge, such companies have been housed in older facilities. In other cases, a mixed-use ap-

*Mill complexes may be a product of an outdated conception of the economy, but, if they remain in good condition, they can be recycled as part of the new economic future. Communities can gain from this industrial infrastructure. Many new businesses, giving employment to numerous local people, can locate in structures that once housed just one company.*









*If community leadership is in place to take on a mill restoration or revitalization project, there is a good chance that it will succeed. While challenges such as retraining the workforce, adding up-to-date infrastructure, providing financing and finding local businesses that are willing to locate in the mill are important, the quality of the leadership team will determine how well the project will proceed.*

adequate local labor pool. Most workers tend to stay in the area immediately following a closing as they are able to collect unemployment insurance, live off severance pay or rely on a spouse's income. Workers are also tied to the community for other reasons. They may not leave immedi-

ately to avoid disruption in their children's schooling or because of the time it takes to sell a home.

Community leaders must move expeditiously during this period to attract new companies or assist workers in forming their own, before workers do move out of the area making the



community less attractive to new or relocating firms. In Gardner, Massachusetts, the former "Chair City," industry closed with few efforts made by community officials to bring skilled workers into new "high end" manufacturing concerns. Workers here have now scattered or retired. The community lost an opportunity to recover, and the mill buildings remain largely vacant.

Equally important is worker adaptability. Workers with a "union mentality" are often perceived by company officials as a liability. They think of them as workers who follow only the letter of the job rather than make efforts to match the needs of the company.

This image, in our opinion, is not an accurate one. We have not seen any appreciable difference in labor adaptability between union and nonunion environments. More important are workers' characteristics: Are they timely, legal, committed to high output and willing to accept change? If so, there is indeed an opportunity to attract new companies, as has happened in Killingly, Connecticut, where the Staples Corporation is placing a large facility. Company officials selected Killingly over ten other sites because of the qualities of the local work force.

### **An Up-To-Date Infrastructure Is Important**

Most mill towns have adequate water, sewer, electric and phone systems in place. In fact, New England towns were among the first communities to build them. However, as the costs of such systems has escalated, and as these communities become increasingly subject to economic insecurity, many of these systems have begun to erode.

We have noted four problems. First, water is becoming less available and more costly. Communities are now increasingly limiting the amount of water taken out of the ground and moving toward full-cost recovery. As a result, water-intensive industries are being subjected to higher water fees.

Secondly, sewer systems rarely match current environmental protection standards. Thus, to revitalize old mills, communities must first invest in new and costly sewage systems. Thirdly, many mills have relied on local electrical companies to supply power, a benefit to the local economy, particularly during hard times. However, the introduction of "retail wheeling" has given mill owners the option of purchasing power elsewhere.

Finally, access to an up-to-date fiber-optic telecommunications system is imperative. In short, if the community has current and efficient water, sewer, electric and telephone systems, than the mill has a chance for successful revitalization. If there is even one weakness among the four systems, chances for recovery are minimal.

### **The Presence of an Industrial Cluster Is Important**

Mill facilities that are located in areas where there is a high degree of competitiveness, a commitment to constant im-

provement and a focus on world markets, have a higher chance of revitalization than those that are geographically isolated or are "free-standing" firms. What is most interesting is that the same phenomena seems to work for both low and high tech industries. High technology firms like Wang, Data General and Digital were started in old mill buildings.

### **The Mill Must Be Environmentally Clean**

If there is any problem, or even rumors of a problem, the mill will not be revitalized. For this reason, it is imperative that owners ensure a clean bill of health for their buildings. While this can be costly, the community, owners and banks have no choice. Further, we expect that most states will begin to adopt the stringent standards found in the Northeast.

### **Local Marketing Is Essential**

This does not mean advertising in *Fortune* or the *Wall Street Journal*. It means developing a campaign that focuses on firms growing approximately 30 to 50 miles from the mill's location. It means developing an ambassador program conducted by local business leaders; developing fact sheets on land, labor and capital availability, and laying out ways the community is prepared to help new and relocating business interests.

### **Local Leadership Is Essential**

After all is said and done, the one factor that is common to all our projects is the presence of strong local leadership. Various people have served this leadership role, including mayors, planners, business people, chamber of commerce officials and a committee. There is no one model for success, but as consultants, we know almost from the very start of a mill recovery project if it will succeed. If the leadership is in place to take on the project once we leave, then the odds are that it will be successful. If not, it will fail.

After twenty years of involvement with mill town revitalization, we remain confident that such communities can have a vibrant future. They will continue to grow, decline and grow again. Each time, the changes will bring a new dynamic to the community. And each time, the community will ask, "What next?"